The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

Intuitive Decision Process Training for Tactical Team Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Most police organizations have some group of highly trained and specially equipped personnel who handle situations when the agencies' normal response capabilities have been overwhelmed. Occasionally, even these special teams will be faced with circumstances that are particularly novel and pose a greater threat than what has been encountered in the past. In order to prepare the tactical team leaders to deal with these emergent crises, agencies should provide training specific to developing intuitive based decision-making skills.

Information found in leadership texts, psychology-based research, and police administration periodicals identify intuition-based decision processes as a skill that can be developed by those who have become subject matter experts through extensive experience of overcoming novel inputs in real or simulated critical incidents. Once this extreme expertise has been achieved, the intuitive leader will be able to improvise solutions outside the scope of known remedies in order to bring severe incidents back in to the range of those that can be handled by standard procedures. Without this developed skill, truly emergent critical situations can continue to spiral out of control.

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INTRODUCTION

Police departments are delegated the responsibility to protect the citizens and property that occupy their jurisdiction. In the later part of the 20th century, situations began to occur that stressed the personnel, training, and equipment of the police departments of the time. On August 1, 1966, Charles Whitman climbed to the top of the University of Texas Tower and killed 14 citizens and wounded another 32 until two police officers entered the tower and were able to kill Whitman. During the shootout, local citizens brought their deer hunting rifles to the scene because local police did not have weapons that could reach the assailant at the top of the tower. In 1974, the Symbionese Liberation Army holed up in a house and engaged approximately 400 police officers in an hour's long shootout in a residential neighborhood (Texas Tactical Peace Officers Association [TTPOA], 2001).

Police departments across the country responded by forming tactical teams. These teams were usually made up of specially selected officers and were given special weapons that the regular street officer did not have access to. The tactical teams began to train for these special situations that would require their response. Early in the history of these special weapons and tactics teams (SWAT), police adopted military type tactics that had been developed in training for combat. (TTPOA, 2001)

In addition to training for operational tactics, as police SWAT teams became more sophisticated, it became apparent that consideration should be given to training the SWAT leadership how to make good decisions in these high stress incidents. The US Military adopted the military decision-making process (MDMP). The MDMP is a rigid and compartmentalized technique to address situations by breaking the problem in

to smaller sections so that each of the smaller items can be more easily analyzed and solved (Wolgast, 2005). Analytic decision-making models like the MDMP are effective when the speed of an event does not work against the decision-maker or when the options or challenges presented to the decision-maker are fairly static (Klein, 2003). The scenarios faced by SWAT teams are usually much more divergent and unstable (Tate, 2001).

In a lecture presented at Boston University to the Senior Management Institute for Police Executives in July 2009, Harvard professor, Herman "Dutch" Leonard, described a linear progression of *emergencies* faced by public safety personnel. To some citizens, day-to-day issues that police deal with can seem extreme; to the properly trained person, however, they could be considered as operating in an area of *normal operations*. Situations that stress normal operating procedures, but are within the scope of standard equipment, training, and personnel, would then move to the next higher category of emergencies known as *minor error*. SWAT teams would then be called upon by their police comrades as the situation moved beyond the normal scope of a *minor error* operation in to an area that Leonard referred to as *routine emergencies*. The routine emergencies are what SWAT teams practice for on a day-to-day basis. The standard high risk search warrant or a domestic dispute that leads to a barricaded subject are all real emergencies, but are usually handled with no significant stress by the highly trained and equipped SWAT teams of contemporary police agencies. In situations like an active shooter or a hostage situation, where the suspect can be highly unpredictable, the situation moves to the far end of the paradigm. Leonard described

these as the *crisis zone*. These *crisis zone* situations are framed by the fact that they exist as an emergent crisis that can present *significant novelty* (Leonard, 2009).

In situations that cannot be solved by applying previously successful outcomes seen by the decision-makers, an intuitive decision-making model will be needed to compete against a suspect who has the ability to act freely against the police (Caraccilo & Pothin, 2000). In a 2009 article directed at public safety executives, Howitt and Leonard addressed this particular need by showing the importance of this idea for the intuitive leader: “Improvisation will be of the essence. In true crisis emergency situations, effective leadership will have to organize and carry out rapid and effective innovation, under high stress, in the context of fear” (2009, p. 614). In these highly novel situations, it is imperative to develop management that can respond by moving in and out of the intuitive decision-making process in order to move the crisis back in to the *routine emergency* realm that can be readily managed by standardized analytical decision-making processes.

At their most fundamental level, humans will gravitate towards the information that will keep themselves alive (Grossman, 2004). Good tactical commanders will use this primitive ability, their extensive situational experience, and their cognitive perception to create a gut instinct or *Coup d’oeil* that will allow them to overcome the unknowns and unpredictable behavior of their opponents (Caraccilo & Pothin, 2000). To prepare their staff to deal with the ever increasingly dangerous situations faced by today’s police tactical team, law enforcement agencies should provide training in intuitive decision-making for their tactical decision-makers.

POSITION

Tactical decision-makers need to have the ability to overcome novelty that can be introduced in to crisis situations. The decision-maker must have the ability to get outside of the normal analytical decision-making process that has proven successful in average emergent incidents. Of all public safety personnel, the police more often go in to situations facing an unpredictable opponent. The thing that works against personnel in a law enforcement setting over firefighters facing a wild land fire is that the opponent the police are facing has the potentially indomitable ability of free will. The free will of the suspect can cause significant unpredictability in trying to stabilize a critical incident. Working to the advantage of the police, the very nature of being exposed to dangerous situations over and over in their work creates an intuitive ability to become aware of impending danger, even before they realize it themselves. Researchers have found that the way the brain goes about making perceptions and then creating a response allows humans to act responsively even before they are consciously aware of their intuitive response (Pinizotto, Davis, & Miller, 2004).

The best decision-making situations occur when leaders use analytical processes to cope with normal emergencies but then apply intuitive decision-making in conjunction with that analysis. The prepared leader will use the analytical function as a power base from which to put intuition in the “driver’s seat.” In this functional system, the intuitive ability of the leader allows them to see the big picture and to maintain situational awareness in order to allow the decision-maker to apply the precise requirements of the analytical decision process (Klein, 2003).

Critical incidents experienced by police tactical teams are often akin to short bouts of combat experienced by military personnel. These situations are the ones at the far right of Leonard's emergency progression, the ones that cause the sub conscious fight or flight physiological response. The tactical leader who will win this scenario is the one who has prepared themselves by developing a *combat mindset* through which they can filter out the noise of the combat, can deal with the overwhelming physiological effects of adrenaline, and allow their intuitive skill to execute the proper remedy to the situation (Howe, 2005).

Hormones released in the body during high stress situations can affect both tactile and cognitive ability of decision-makers. Once a human heart rate moves above 145 beats per minute, individuals lose the ability to apply complex motor skills and cognitive reaction time is significantly affected. Once the heart rate moves up above 175 beats per minute, cognitive ability seriously deteriorates, and the leader suffers from various physiological deficiencies including visual and auditory exclusion (Grossman, 2004).

To function successfully in the area of severe mental and physical stress known as *condition black*, leaders must recognize the onset of the negative symptoms associated with this condition and prepare themselves to minimize the effects on their ability to make successful decisions. Most trainers agree that one of the best ways to immunize the leader from these detrimental effects is through repetitive practice. This repetitive practice also applies to moving through the decision-making processes until the leader develops muscle memory or a cognitive imprint of how they are supposed to act in order to be successful. Once that imprint is developed, leaders under significant

stress will intuitively continue to function as they have trained (Grossman, 2004). The leader will intuitively move faster through the decision-making cycle able to deal with novelties while on “autopilot,” adapting to environmental cues even faster than they realize they are doing it. It should be noted that intuition is not the same as the primordial attribute that many animals share of instinct. Intuition is based on topical competency that can be enhanced through experience and training while instinct is innate and preprogrammed before any situational experience occurs.

Law enforcement, by its very nature, is reactive in application. As a small caveat, departments usually have some component related to crime prevention, but these units are historically token efforts at best. Because of the primarily reactionary nature of their work, law enforcement agents rely on extensive plans and standard operating procedures (SOPS). These plans and SOPS are analytical in nature. That is, once the plan is on paper and is distributed to the troops to execute, it becomes a simple process to which officers are admonished to adhere strictly. Various case law citations such as *State of Illinois v. McArthur* (2001) speak to the freedom of police officers to exercise discretion, but when administrators distribute extensive plans and “General Orders” they are intentionally reducing the amount of discretion they want their officers to apply in the field. The paradox that develops by this direction through analytical process is that it creates a force of officers who are not encouraged to apply intuition, and, in turn, they are actually punished for moving outside of analytical processes to seek successful outcomes. It is imperative, then, that when the force faces a quagmire in the decision-making process caused by situational divergence; they must then appropriately apply

intuition to effectively move to the best course of action, even one that they have never had to exert before.

As police are usually type “A” personalities, they tend to gravitate towards celebrating the success of the plan, though as Klein (2003) pointed out “It’s a mistake to fall in love with your plan” (p. 174). When tactical planners want their plan to succeed, above all else, they can become blind to indicators that the plan is failing. This slippery slope precipitated by only applying analytical processes will lead the tactical planner to a point where there are no longer any “acceptable” options available in the plan. It is then that the intuition based decision processes of the seasoned leader will be able to guide the leader through the fog of war outside of the normal decision cycle until the circumstances can be brought back in to the recognizable arena to be handled once again by an easily identified analytical process (Klein, 2003).

COUNTER POSITION

Emergent police incidents that involve SWAT teams that are characterized by situations that have been trained for, environmental affects that have been prepared for, suspect behavior that is familiar or expected from persons in crisis, or sequences of events that are dictated by SOPS can be classified as *Routine Emergencies* (Howitt & Leonard, 2009). Regardless of the size or scope of the routine emergency, SWAT teams are typically capable of handling these incidents. The reason behind this ability is that they prepare properly and an analytical “recognition primed” decision model can easily allow the tactical leader to apply known, previously successful, actions to take care of the suspect (Klein, 1998).

Police professionals can make a list of the actions, behaviors, situations, and backgrounds of suspects that they have dealt with in the past. Using these lists and studying past outcomes, statisticians and researchers have applied predictive modeling with statistical success of up to 78% (Michaud, St-Yves, & Guay, 2008). Just as these researchers used algorithms and computers to predict an outcome to emergent events, tactical decision-makers have several analytical models available to them. These analytical models fall in to a category referred to as rational action models. An oft used example of these types of models is John Boyd's OODA loop that helps the decision-maker through the decision-making steps of observation, orientation, decision, and action. In addition, the Military Decision-Making Model ("U.S. Army Ranger Handbook," 2000), and Klein's (RPD) Recognition-Primed Model (Leonard, 2009) fall in to the rational action model type and are readily available to apply.

Problems with these recognition-based models begin to emerge when the decision-maker suffers from situational awareness deficits, situational experience novelty, and cognitive biases (Wolgast, 2005). Because recognition based processes are reliant upon previous experience as their predominant determiner of successful choices, when new or unforeseen inputs are introduced in to the situation, the models that require completion of one step before moving to the next can begin to become unstable. As leaders begin to narrow the field of previously successful choices in each subsequent cycle through the model, the chance that the situation will end successfully also narrows. As this happens, it is the tactical decision-makers intuition that will allow them to move to the outside of the decision-making loop or to skip the next step in a normally analytical process. Since the facets of the analytical decision-making process

go to making a leader an expert in their field or what is referred to by some as a genius in their profession, intuition is more than just a gut feeling that some decision-makers rely on. It is all of this experience that makes a leader more than competent in their field and gives them the unique ability to move beyond the normal process and apply their intuition or Coup d'oeil (Caraccilo & Pothin, 2000). This adaptive capacity is what gives the intuitive leader the creative ability, based on their operational genius, to overcome any introduced novelty in true crisis situations (Wolgast, 2005).

Those that argue that agencies can prepare for every eventuality would point to the US military training program that is based on five pillars of combat training to help soldiers and leaders prepare for war in the most realistic manner possible. Of those five pillars, the techniques identified as the third and fourth pillars are particularly useful in preparing leaders to make decisions under significant stress. The third pillar of combat requires that an opposing force (OPFOR) simulate the tactics and actions of an actual enemy. The fourth pillar requires proper training facilities be used and the ability to have weapons that simulate the injury or death of soldiers or the loss of pieces of equipment (Reeson, 2006). OPFOR and weapons simulations have been successful in preparing military units and are recommended for police tactical units. This training should include a cycle that includes planning, rehearsing, and training in a realistic manner. This cycle should be repeated until all known problems have been addressed (Howe, 2005).

The opposing force and simulated weapons, like paintball guns or simulated wax bullets fired in training, give tactile feedback and are intended to increase the officers' physiological responses during training so that their response in stressful situations can

be observed and, if necessary, corrected. Just as tactical leaders need to see how their officers will perform under stress, so to, the tactical command needs to evaluate how the tactical decision-makers will perform while trying to make life and death decisions in the true crisis zone emergencies (Tate, 2001).

RECOMMENDATION

Techniques and equipment police use have continued to adapt to the increasing technological and environmental stresses placed on the societal protectors. Similarly, this is true for the tactical decision-makers who are called upon to step in when the centurions need help or need to have the ability to adapt when crisis situations move from the normal emergencies to the extreme calamity. As the tag line to the Hollywood motion picture portrayal of police called *S.W.A.T.* points out, “even cops dial 911” (Johnson, 2003). To prepare the tactical decision-makers, who respond to that call, to competently operate in this terminal cognitive arena, agencies should provide training in intuitive decision-making.

Whether they are called police, sheriffs, mounties, constables, marshals, agents, rangers, or any other myriad of names that law enforcement has been labeled by various jurisdictions, all of them have some group of individuals who are the tip of the spear when things have gone horribly wrong. These specialized tactical operators have the most sophisticated equipment and train repetitively to have a tactical advantage in those situations that require their particular brand of intervention. When these crisis situations occur, the tactical operators sprint in to action led by team leaders and command decision-makers. These decision-makers are trained to follow explicit procedures and well versed in the techniques that have proven effective against their

opponents in the past. In the majority of emergent crises, these practiced responses have proven to be more than adequate. However, when unpredictable events occur, the tactical decision-makers need to have also trained in methods to prepare them to move outside of the normal decision-making options and apply their own situational genius to seek out an acceptable method to bring the extreme crisis back in to the realm that can be dealt with using standard procedures and training.

The tactical decision-makers who have honed their skills are able to perceive unstable and novel inputs in the decision-making cycle and are able to intuitively move through the fog of the incident maintaining situational awareness to seek a remedy to the novelty before they are conscious of the doom that nearly occurred. Their brains are able to do this because these tactical decision-makers are prolific at applying analytical decision processes. With this basis of information, it becomes instantaneously obvious to them that a breakdown in the natural flow of the analytical process is afoot.

Decision-makers must learn to deal with the physiological and cognitive dampeners that affect cognitive ability in severe stress by realistic and repetitive practice that simulates novelty being introduced in to crisis situations. These leaders must prepare to the point that they are situational geniuses. This will, in turn, allow the full effects of intuitive decision-making to produce the desired outcome and to be able to return to the analytical processes that are so effective in standard emergencies.

Having recognized that human analysis of critical incidents can be affected by various biases of the decision-maker or noise in the perceptive abilities of the human brain, researchers have shown that in some situations, mathematical equations can

obtain what, in other disciplines, are statistically valid positive outcomes in nearly 80% of the critical incidents that the equations are applied. These equations were applied to some 534 critical incidents by researchers Michaud, St-Yves and Guay in 2008 to demonstrate successful “predictive modeling.” In situations that can incur the cost of human lives though, society is unwilling to accept those odds (Michaud, St-Yves, & Guay, 2008).

While not yet widely adopted in the law enforcement training realm, scientists and artists alike have recognized the important potential of combining intuitive ability with analytical processes. The text *Metaphoric Mind: A Celebration of Creative Consciousness* by Samples (1976) stated, "Albert Einstein called the intuitive or metaphoric mind a sacred gift. He added that the rational mind was a faithful servant” (p. 26). At the other end of the spectrum, the 19th century poet Rudyard Kipling eloquently portrays the point at which intuition overcomes chaos when he said, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs …; If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, … If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster… Yours is the Earth” (Kipling, 1910).

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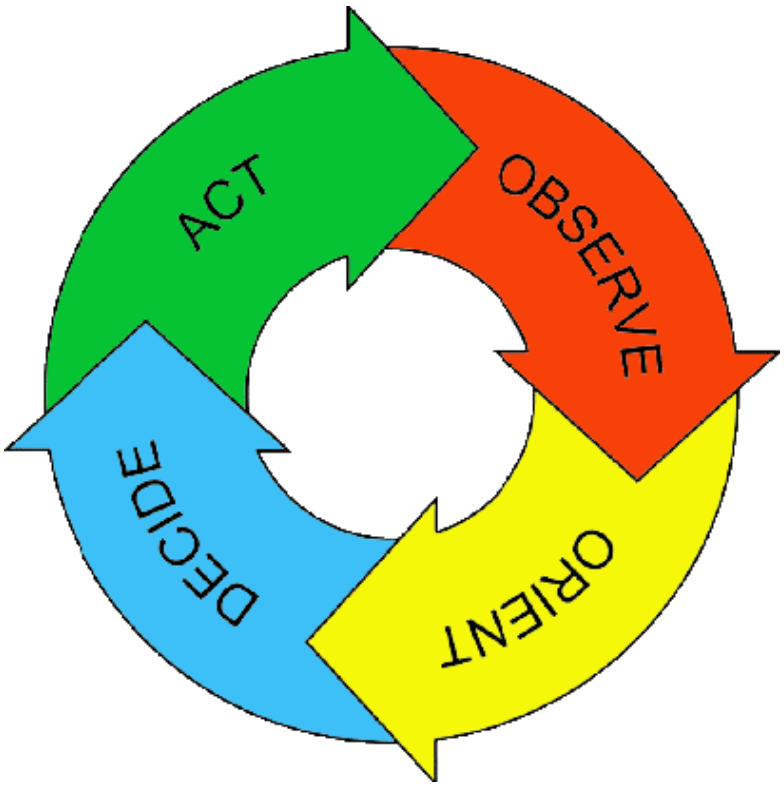
APPENDIX A

John Boyd's OODA loop (http//www au af mil/au/awc/awcgate/mcdp6/ch2.htm)



APPENDIX B

Gary Klein's Recognition Primed Model

(http://www.c3fire.org/training/decision/decision.en.shtml)